# BIGGS AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN EARTH SCIENCE TEACHING

**Presented to Natalie Bursztyn**

Natalie Bursztyn
*Bakersfield College*

***Citation by Eric Hiatt***

It is a privilege to nominate Natalie Bursztyn for the Biggs Earth Science Teaching Award. I have known Natalie for about 12 years; she was an undergraduate student in my Sedimentology and Stratigraphy course at Queen's University, Canada. She received her B.Sc. and M.Sc. degrees from Queen's. As a student, Natalie had an infectious enthusiasm and positive attitude that was evident to the faculty then–characteristics that she continues to display today.

Natalie taught at Bakersfield College beginning in 2005, and has always employed an interactive teaching style; she has a reputation for being able to keep students highly engaged and interested. Natalie is known for making connections with students and for her ability to make complex concepts understandable, which speaks to her effectiveness as a skilled teacher. She loves teaching geology in the field and regularly organizes field trips for her students. Based on these field experiences, students note that Natalie's courses have been "the best thing that has happened to them…" during their college experience.

Natalie is a force of nature. During her time at Bakersfield College she wrote three lab manuals, authored a book "Geology of Kern County", she wrote many of the new Geology curriculum standards for the state of California, spearheaded development of a cooperative agreement and effective transfer of credits between Bakersfield College and the nearby California State University branch, and she developed many new courses. She organized the campus Geology Club, leads two field trips per semester, assigns and corrects written assignments, quizzes, and exams every semester. This degree of hard work and dedication would be commendable if she taught at a private college with virtually unlimited resources; however, what makes these accomplishments truly amazing is that she has excelled at a state college under extreme budget constraints, and while teaching classes with enrollments of 100+! She is a source of inspiration and she always takes time to listen to students' concerns, and as a result, has received the campus-wide Advisor of the Year Award twice.

One theme that comes through repeatedly in the numerous nomination letters submitted is that Natalie has made an enormous impact in the lives of many students—from giving them confidence in themselves to strive for more than they ever thought they could achieve, for making geology field experiences accessible to students with physical disabilities, to inspiring them to become geologists. Her nominators use terms such as: dedicated, respected, gifted teacher, tenacious, and amazing individual. She has a reputation for accomplishing anything she puts her mind to, and--always--for truly loving teaching. One of her nominators noted that she has made a bigger impact on campus than any other professor.

A great teacher first and foremost is an exemplary role model. Natalie is, at her core, an amazing role model for students. Her enthusiasm, energy, and drive are readily apparent to her students. In their nomination letters, Natalie's peers stress that she is respected and admired on campus and is an inspiring teacher. Natalie never stands still—and recently has begun a new chapter in her career; she has just begun a Ph.D. in Geology at Utah State University.

Congratulations, Natalie—it is frustrating to try to describe in a few words such an exemplary life dedicated to others, but I have never met anyone more deserving of the Biggs Earth Science Teaching Award.

***Response by Natalie Bursztyn***

I am truly honored to be the recipient of this award—though every rationale listed in my nomination I did because I enjoyed doing it, I wanted to do it, or because I felt it was of great value to the students, the school, or the education system in general. Anyone who stepped forward wanting to learn, no matter their circumstance, I'd help. Together we can make it happen, we just need to figure out how.

I love geology, I love making geology jokes, integrating geology and/or geology jokes into non-geological conversations, explaining the geology of regions I am familiar with, and trying to puzzle out the geological history of places I'm unfamiliar with… when I hike up a mountain, I conjure up images of the depositional environment the rocks I'm walking across formed in rather than staying aware of wherever I actually happen to be.

I think that when I teach I try to project or share this excitement and the thought process involved with the students. I want them to see in a rock, not the mineral crystals or clasts (although that is important), but the deep time and history in it.

I also love to explore the interconnected nature, repeating patterns, evolution and history of geology itself. To think of how recently plate tectonics was accepted as a theory and how long ago deep time and evolution were understood by the scientific community, and to see the latter become perceived as more and more controversial amongst the general population is disappointing. I believe that teaching critical thinking is our strongest defense.

Critical thinking comes naturally in teaching geology—as long as we don't have a time machine at our disposal, the open-ended aspect of resolving the evolution of landscapes requires careful and critical analysis of all the evidence and possible interpretations. From this standpoint, I see geology as a fundamental course for all students to take, and teach it not as though they will become geologists, but so they develop skills necessary for success in all their college classes and the real world beyond. So they appreciate the awesome planet they live on and understand that every component of their iPhone was mined, refined and transported somewhere to be assembled, packed and transported somewhere else before they bought it. So that they rubberneck as they drive by a road-cut and ask themselves how the outcrop formed and maybe even come to a screeching halt on the side of the road to ask the person examining it with a hand lens if they are a geologist and then tell this startled geologist all about that super fun geology class they took in college… true story.

And so, with this passion for teaching in mind, and geology, and stewardship for our only habitable planet, I thank you for this amazing recognition. I am embarking on a new journey in pursuit of this passion of mine, and am now two months into a PhD in geology and geoscience education … being advised by a former recipient of this very award.